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Detentions in Singapore: IS Supporters' Misreading of Islam

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SYNOPSIS

The Singapore Government announced in February the arrests of two Singaporeans for their involvement in terrorism-related activities. One had provided financial and material support to a Malaysian fighter in Syria while influencing the other arrested individual with his radical views. These arrests showcase Islamic State's (IS) misinterpretation of Islamic doctrines such as piety, martyrdom and intercession.

COMMENTARY

IN FEBRUARY 2019, Singapore authorities arrested 48-year-old Malaysia-based businessman Mohamed Kazali bin Salleh and 28-year-old Hazim Syahmi bin Mahfoot on terrorism-related charges. Kazali had funded a Malaysian Islamic State fighter for his trip to Syria as well as provided him with material assistance there. He was also willing to facilitate the travel of others who wished to fight in Syria.

Kazali's role as a financial and material supporter of IS fighters throws a spotlight on how certain Islamic concepts that outline the conditions under which a Muslim should help another have been misinterpreted by terrorist groups, including IS. The first is about helping one another in furthering virtue and *taqwa* (piety or God-consciousness); the second concerns martyrdom; and the third is over the question of a martyr's intercession for fellow Muslims to enter paradise.

Misreading Islamic Doctrines

Kazali had funded Malaysian Akel Zainal for his trip to Syria because he believed Akel was doing something good and acting out of piety. Kazali's support was likely based on an often misconstrued belief among supporters of Islamist militant groups that the

assistance provided could earn him a ticket to paradise should Akel be killed and achieve 'martyrdom'.

Firstly, jihadist supporters like Kazali tend to wrongly believe that they are doing a service to Islam by providing the means for others to be involved in the fighting in conflict zones where Muslims are seen to be "persecuted". While the Quran calls on Muslims '*to help one another in furthering virtue and God-consciousness*', it also warns them not to '*help one another in furthering evil and enmity*'. In this light, Kazali's action cannot be considered as promoting righteousness and piety; instead, it constitutes advancing nefarious activities and conflicts.

This is because Akel had joined IS, a designated terrorist organisation which had violated numerous Islamic laws upheld by Muslim scholars and the wider Muslim community. Among others, IS explicitly went against Islamic laws which forbid the killing of innocents and non-combatants, the desecration and destruction of places of worship, the torture of prisoners, the mutilation of corpses and forced conversions. IS also revived slavery and misinterpreted and distorted Islamic teachings and doctrines to suit its religio-political ends.

In doing so, IS revolted against the Muslim community, rulers and scholars who oppose them. IS waged armed and violent opposition against Muslim states for not ruling according to the Sharia and rejected advice by prominent Islamic scholars around the world to stop the fighting. Instead, IS labelled the scholars, rulers and governments as apostates. Using this as an excuse to declare *jihad*, IS has legitimised terrorising and killing of government and community leaders, members of the armed forces, and public servants, treating them as legitimate targets.

Questionable Jihad

Secondly, Kazali would have defined Akel's fight against perceived oppression, persecution and injustice against Islam and Muslims as a *jihad*. This is supported by his view that the IS fighters were "righteous" individuals defending Muslims in Syria. However, it is essential to underscore that not only Akel but also IS' claim of jihad does not automatically qualify it to be legitimate and in accordance with Islam.

IS has waged jihad in a manner that flouts all guidelines which the Qur'an and Traditions of the Prophet have stipulated. IS' so-called *jihad* has been based on hatred, revenge, bloodlust and military adventurism, resulting in the killing of non-combatants, women and children.

It is clear that IS' motive for *jihad* has departed from the one prescribed by an authentic Prophetic saying which explains that jihad cannot be waged without having both the right intention and just cause. This is a fundamental issue because in the end, how *jihad* is waged determines God's acceptance. As such, IS' war is not *jihad*, and its dead fighters are not martyrs. Period.

Related to *jihad* is the concept of martyrdom. Linking martyrdom and martyrs predominantly with military actions as IS has done is fundamentally wrong. Individuals like Kazali should have heeded the fact that Prophet Muhammad himself had defined martyrdom and martyrs in an expansive manner. The Prophet included "the believer

who suffers a painful death from a variety of debilitating illnesses, from a difficult labour in the case of women, or from falling victim to an unfortunate accident, such as being crushed to death by a falling wall, in addition to falling on the battlefield”.

Thirdly, Kazali could have wrongly connected Akel’s supposed martyrdom with his own afterlife reward. That is, should Akel be “martyred in battle”, Akel’s intercession (*shafaat*) would allow him (Kazali) to enter paradise. In principle, intercession is only applicable to those who are killed while fighting a legitimate *jihad* which IS’ war is clearly not.

Also, the privilege of intercession demands complete compliance with the prerequisites of martyrdom as discussed earlier. In simple terms, a fighter cannot expect to dwell in paradise and intercede for others when he fights alongside those who engage in atrocities instead of just acts. Hence, the understanding of intercession by jihadist supporters like Kazali is theologically and logically flawed.

Moving Forward

To fortify the community against supporting the erroneous beliefs of terrorist groups, it is critical that the religious authorities and scholars develop a clear understanding of the religious doctrines and their proper contextual application. Reading the religious texts and knowing the context should not be devoid of independent reasoning that empowers them with the wisdom to put things in its rightful place.

In this regard, MUIS and the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) are moving in the right direction with their efforts to educate and raise the awareness of the Muslim community, both in the virtual and physical space. For instance, MUIS’ MuslimSG smartphone app engages netizens with bite-size contemporary Islamic guidance.

Among its initiatives, RRG recently completed its second run of the Awareness Programme for Youth (APY) that focuses on the practice of Islam in a secular, plural society like Singapore. These outreach strategies are commendable; they could be developed further to reach out to more Muslim segments on the misinterpretation of Islamic concepts by terrorist groups. They can also help anticipate extremist narratives in an ever-changing religious landscape.

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