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## **Battling for the Hearts and Minds of Youths: Reclaiming Religious Authority and Identity**

*By Mohamed Bin Ali and Kanishk Sudhir Ramchandra*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The recent detention of another young Singaporean under the Internal Security Act (ISA) is a sombre reminder of the continuing battle for the hearts and minds of digitally immersed youths. The grip of extremist ideology in the online realm is further compounded by the turbulent state of global affairs. The case underscores an urgent need to counter harmful narratives and promote contextual and inclusive religious guidance for youths.*

### **COMMENTARY**

The recent detention of a Singaporean youth under the Internal Security Act (ISA) is a clear indication of the persistence of online self-radicalisation. Described as a “staunch” supporter of the Islamic State (IS), the 17-year-old youth became deeply indoctrinated by extremist material while initially seeking religious knowledge online.

Reports by Singapore’s Internal Security Department (ISD) revealed that he had made plans to travel to Syria and join IS and that his interest escalated after the Israeli attacks on Palestinians in Gaza. The youth later abandoned his plan and decided to conduct a localised attack, preparing himself with walkthroughs of the planned area of attack on non-Muslims in the residential heartland of Tampines and practising with kitchen knives and scissors to inflict harm.

### **Extremism Persists**

The current conflicts in the Middle East – the Israel-Hamas war in particular – have had a detrimental effect on counter-radicalisation narratives and measures. Cycles of violence and instability in the region serve as a potent recruitment tool for extremist groups. Indeed, the ISD’s *Singapore Terrorist Threat Assessment Report 2024* warns

that such conflicts can be exploited to fuel extremist recruitment, especially among vulnerable young people. The report also indicates a dramatic rise in ISA detentions, with a troubling proportion being minors.

Another factor which could potentially fan the flames of religious violence is the alarming rise of far-right extremism in the West. The “injustices” and “racism” experienced by minorities there could potentially find expression in religious extremism. This dynamic threatens to set off a vicious cycle that could be exploited by groups intent on undermining peaceful societies.

### **Seeking Religious Knowledge and Its Risks**

Cases of online radicalisation often begin with individuals seeking religious knowledge – an endeavour considered noble in Islam. However, without proper guidance, such pursuits may end up tragically. The recent case mirrors a similar incident in November 2022, when ISD detained a 15-year-old Singaporean after he was radicalised online. In both cases, initial interest in religious discourse led to engagement with controversial foreign preachers, whose errant preachings led them towards violent extremist ideologies.

The youths acquired segregationist practices, such as refraining from greeting non-Muslims during festivals, eventually leading them towards a desire to harm non-Muslims and become a “martyr” in the process. Contrary to common belief, most terrorists lack religious knowledge; in fact, research shows that Al-Qaeda’s Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Al Zawahiri had little to no formal religious training.

Individuals with limited religious knowledge are particularly vulnerable to radical preachers who create a façade of religious legitimacy but who, in fact, cherry-pick and decontextualise Quranic verses. Many terror groups have employed such strategies to recruit followers and advance their agendas.

### **Religious Education for the Digital Age**

In Singapore, fewer than 25 per cent of Muslims between the age of 10-24 attend formal or structured Islamic religious classes, highlighting a clear gap in Islamic religious education. It is thus essential to provide youths with access to authentic, structured platforms for learning Islam, which will foster a balanced and inclusive understanding of the faith.

To reach a broader segment of the young in Singapore, existing religious education service providers must align their teaching methodology, and content and engagement strategies to suit contemporary issues and trends, integrating technology to meet the demands of the digital generation. Religious scholars and teachers should also acquire the knowledge and develop the necessary soft skills to address sensitive and controversial topics in online spaces. Such safe spaces are important for young individuals seeking religious guidance.

The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS)’s effort to formulate a Singaporean Muslim identity through an interpretation of the practices of Islam that are suitable for the Singaporean context is highly commendable. Their effort to develop a progressive

and contextual understanding of Islam, ideal for Singapore's multi-ethnic, multi-religious society, strengthens resilience against exclusivist and extremist narratives.

### **Algorithms and the Internet Lurking Danger**

A key question remains: How does a young person seeking religious knowledge online end up embracing violent extremist ideologies? In his book *Stolen Focus*, Johann Hari reveals that algorithms on platforms like YouTube push users toward more extreme content to maximise engagement. A youth exploring a basic interest and understanding of Islam may gradually be led to increasingly controversial and violent content.

Other worrying dynamics that have facilitated online radicalisation are filter bubbles, which bring about intellectual isolation when a personalised information environment is created by algorithms that narrow a person's exposure to diverse viewpoints, and echo chambers, where beliefs are reinforced by hearing the same perspectives and opinions over and over again. They play on a young person's vulnerabilities on profound issues such as identity and belonging.

Media platform providers must be persuaded to align more ethical approaches to moderate their content and services. Ethical guidelines should govern the algorithms, ensuring that harmful content is not amplified. Government agencies should also monitor foreign influence on social media to ensure that the young and vulnerable are not manipulated to become instruments of hate and extreme ideology.

### **Conclusion**

The dangers of radicalisation and extremism continue to proliferate around the globe. Many individuals seek religious guidance to make sense of volatile world events. We must help them avoid falling into the hands of those who spread hate and discord. While the importance and urgency to counter harmful narratives cannot be overstated, efforts should not be spared to develop an inclusive Islamic identity based on authentic Islamic scholarship and engagement in Islamic education for the young.

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