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Staunching The Rise of Terrorist Fighters

By Rohan Gunaratna

SYNOPSIS

The conflicts in Israel, Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen and Syria will have a generational impact. The 7 October 2023 attack against Israel in Gaza and its consequences have set back the prospects of a two-state solution to the Palestinian issue and may attract a new wave of foreign fighters to embark on terrorist activities like what was seen following the military debacles in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. What can be done to stem another rise of the terrorist fighters?

COMMENTARY

The 7 October 2023 attack by Hamas triggered an overwhelming military response by Israel on Gaza. The next day, in support of Hamas, the Lebanese Hezbollah attacked Israel with rockets and artillery, forcing the evacuation of an estimated 96,000 Israeli civilians from northern Israel. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) retaliated with drones, artillery shelling, and airstrikes on Hamas and Hezbollah targets throughout Gaza and Lebanon, respectively. The large number of Palestinian deaths and injuries – with more than 45,000 reported killed by 28 December 2024 in Gaza alone – generated a global reaction, sparking hate crimes and religiously motivated terrorist attacks against Israelis and Jews worldwide.

In Singapore, the terrorism threat has also been elevated, and although this has been managed effectively, its impact is significant. After Israel's response to Hamas' attacks, Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) arrested at least five Singaporeans who had become radicalised by the conflict. Three of them even planned to travel to the Middle East to fight for the Palestinians. Radicalised online, they trained or had planned to obtain training to fight in Gaza against the IDF. They practised how to kill and had either gone to or planned to visit shooting ranges in Thailand and Indonesia to train in the use of firearms.

The three radicalised Singaporeans, Muhammad Indra Aqmal Effendy, a 21-year-old lift mechanic; Mohamad Latiff Rahim, a 41-year-old director of a digital marketing company; and Nurisham Yusoff, a 44-year-old security guard, were arrested in October and November 2024. Indra and Nurisham had planned to fight for Hamas against the IDF in Gaza, while Latiff had planned to fight for Iran-linked threat groups. The latter was also willing to carry out attacks in Singapore if instructed.

After seeing online content showing the killing of Palestinian civilians by the IDF, Indra was emotionally affected. He consumed extremist materials on armed jihad and martyrdom. He wanted to fight for Hamas and die a martyr in the belief that this was a legitimate form of armed jihad. Indra prepared to travel to Gaza. He searched online for travel routes and identified a foreign contact based in the Palestinian territories he thought could help. He practised his skills in unarmed combat and “shooting” with toy guns at home. He also searched online for shooting ranges in Batam (Indonesia), where he could train with real weapons.

Based in Bangkok (Thailand), Latiff viewed online content on “end of times” prophecies in 2010 and was convinced it would happen in his lifetime. Believing it was his duty to fight the enemies of Islam during the end of times, he prepared himself by visiting a shooting range in Bangkok in 2022. The 7 October 2023 attacks in Gaza further convinced him that the end of times was imminent and that Iran’s Supreme Leader would soon issue a call for Muslims to engage in armed jihad. He practised with kitchen knives and simulated attacks on vital parts of the body.

Nurisham was exposed to radical and segregationist foreign preachers when searching for religious knowledge on social media in 2020. To him, martyrdom was the easiest way to atone for his sins and enter heaven during the impending end of times. Online extremist materials linked to the Israel-Hamas war convinced him that it was his religious obligation to fight in Gaza. He posted extensively on social media about the war, hoping that someone would help to get him into the war zone. Nurisham also believed that his military training in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) during his earlier military conscription would be helpful. He had planned to visit a shooting range in Batam.

Based on the ISD’s investigations, the three men were unrelated. They acted alone, and there was no indication that they had radicalised or recruited others. Their family members were unaware of their violent plans.

Preventing Similar Cases

To mitigate the spillover effects of overseas conflicts in Singapore, the government should work with community partners to raise public awareness of the risk of radicalisation driven by such foreign conflicts. Such radicalisation – to the point of bearing arms to fight overseas as jihadists – is not new to Singapore. In the late 1990s, several Singaporeans radicalised by the war in Afghanistan between the Taliban and forces allied to the US travelled to Afghanistan and Pakistan for terrorist training. In the 2000s, a few travelled to Syria to help establish a global Islamic caliphate. Today, some want to travel to the Middle East to fight or to conduct terrorist attacks at home.

As a community, Singapore’s Muslims are committed to religious harmony and social

cohesion at home. They have supported the peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, given the impact of social media, which spins narratives and amplifies extremist propaganda, some Muslims in Singapore have become radicalised. To ensure the stability and security of Singapore, every effort must be made to prevent such outside antagonisms and struggles from spilling into Singapore. Those concerned about the plight of Palestinian civilians can provide aid through official humanitarian channels.

Singaporeans have confidence in their government's ability to protect them. However, the threats posed to Singapore's security arising from global and regional developments are reaching a point where community support is vital to pre-empting any possible attack. Singaporeans should remain vigilant even after the situation in the Middle East stabilises. Everyone has a role in securing Singapore and protecting fellow citizens and residents. No terrorist attack can take place if everyone is oriented towards detecting suspicious indicators, signs, and clues of radicalisation and reporting them to the authorities.

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