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## External Conflicts, Local Threats: Tackling Radicalisation the Singapore Way

*By Mohamed Bin Ali and Ahmad Saiful Rijal Bin Hassan*

### SYNOPSIS

*The actions taken by Singapore's Internal Security Department against three individuals recently highlight the worrying trend of radicalisation. While external conflicts, such as the Israel-Hamas war, often serve as catalysts, radicalisation is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by a combination of personal, social, and ideological factors. Singapore has developed unique and effective counter-radicalisation measures to deal with this persistent threat.*

### COMMENTARY

Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) [recently](#) took action against individuals radicalised by both far-right and Islamist extremist ideologies. A youth influenced by far-right extremism consumed Islamophobic and neo-Nazi content online, idolised far-right terrorists, and sought to instigate racial violence in Singapore. He is the [third](#) Singaporean to be dealt with under the city-state's Internal Security Act (ISA) for being radicalised by far-right extremist ideologies.

Meanwhile, a housewife was radicalised by the Israel-Hamas conflict, developing strong sympathies for militant groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis. She actively spread extremist propaganda online and attempted to incite violence against perceived enemies.

Separately, a Malaysian working in Singapore was arrested and repatriated for supporting the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and harbouring aspirations to fight in conflict zones like Syria and Gaza.

With [six](#) Singaporeans dealt with under the ISA due to radicalisation linked to the Gaza conflict, overseas events continue to fuel extremist sentiments locally. Despite

differences in ideology, both far-right and Islamist cases share common triggers, such as exposure to online propaganda, strong identification with violent causes, and the belief that violence is justified.

## **The Impact of Global Conflicts on Radicalisation**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly after the events of 7 October 2023, has captured global attention, generating strong emotions across different communities. In Singapore, which has a significant Muslim community, concern over the humanitarian crisis in Gaza has led some individuals to become radicalised, perceiving the conflict as part of a broader struggle that requires violent action.

Historically, overseas conflicts have drawn foreign fighters who believe they have a moral obligation to participate. During the rise of ISIS in 2014, an estimated 30,000 foreign fighters from over 85 countries, including four radicalised [Singaporeans](#), travelled to Iraq and Syria to join the group. Similarly, radicalisation linked to the Gaza conflict follows this pattern, where sympathisers are drawn into extremist narratives.

At the same time, far-right extremism is also a growing concern globally. While often associated with Western countries, its narratives – such as racial superiority, anti-minority sentiment, and xenophobia – are increasingly [appealing](#) to individuals outside the West.

The recent ISA case involving a far-right extremist youth underscores how online propaganda and ideological influences can shape radicalisation across different ideological spectrums. Despite their ideological differences, Islamist and far-right extremism share common pathways and mechanisms of influence.

## **The Radicalisation Process**

Radicalisation is a complex process through which individuals or groups adopt extremist ideologies that may lead to violent actions. Radicalisation expert Alex P. Schmid explained that the process exists on [three interconnected levels](#): micro, meso, and macro.

At the micro-level, individual factors like personal grievances, psychological traits, and identity crises drive susceptibility to extremist ideologies. This level focuses on the unique vulnerabilities and life experiences that make radical ideas appealing to certain individuals.

The meso-level examines the role of social networks, peer groups, and communities in fostering radicalisation. These environments provide ideological reinforcement, emotional support, and a sense of belonging, making extremist beliefs more entrenched.

At the macro-level, broader structural and societal factors such as political oppression, economic inequality, social marginalisation, or government foreign policy decisions create conditions that facilitate radicalisation.

Both Islamist and far-right radicalisation pathways follow a similar framework. Islamist

extremists may perceive conflicts like the Gaza war as evidence of systemic oppression, reinforcing a call for violent action. Meanwhile, far-right extremists often draw from fears of demographic change, believing in conspiracies such as the “[Great Replacement Theory](#)”, which fuels a justification for violence. In both cases, radicalisation occurs when personal grievances (micro-level) intersect with reinforcing social influences (meso-level) and external events (macro-level), ultimately shaping pathways that may lead to extremist behaviour.

## **Tackling Radicalisation**

Addressing online radicalisation is a challenging task for many governments. The nature of the Internet, especially its social media offshoot, which has become the main medium for radicalisation, makes it difficult for authorities to detect vulnerable individuals early.

Singapore is not immune to this serious challenge. Learning from the experience in dealing with the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist threat more than two decades ago, the country has adopted a whole-of-society approach to tackle the threat of radicalisation. The unique and strong government-community partnership has enabled it to counter the challenges of radicalisation effectively.

The authorities have strengthened the legislative levers to block access to online extremist messaging and ideologies. For example, the Online Safety (Miscellaneous Amendments) Act, which amended the Broadcasting Act, and the Online Criminal Harms Act empower the authorities to restrict access to egregious or criminal content online, including materials that advocate terrorism and incite violence. However, it is impossible to eliminate all extremist content as individuals and groups can create new sites and accounts.

As such, public education remains essential to the city-state’s strategy to counter radicalisation. Its Ministry of Education (MOE) has been a key partner in the ISD’s outreach to schools and institutes of higher learning. Last year, the ISD organised more than 60 outreach events for over 2,000 participants, including students, educators and school counsellors.

The ISD also works with MOE to train school counsellors and student welfare officers on behavioural indicators and appropriate interventions, including early reporting of students who may be at risk of radicalisation. ISD and MOE have jointly produced an online guide for parents and guardians on protecting their children from radicalisation.

The ISD has also worked closely with community groups and partners such as the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) and The Aftercare Group (ACG) to strengthen the community’s resilience to extremist ideas. The RRG hosts visits to its Resource & Counselling Centre and Majulah Gallery and conducts youth forums on countering violent extremism. RRG has also expanded its digital outreach efforts through its TikTok account, launched in June 2023. Last year, RRG launched its “Youth Counselling Manual”, which provides a structured and customised religious counselling approach for youngsters.

At the heart of Singapore’s public outreach efforts is the SGSecure movement, which

is vital in building community resilience against extremism and terrorism. The SGSecure website provides a resource kit outlining signs of radicalisation and the available reporting channels, which are disseminated to religious and community organisations, self-help groups, and operators of counselling hotlines. Recognising the need to engage the youth, the Government expanded its outreach to digital content, launching the SGSecure Instagram account in July 2023. These efforts aim to raise awareness of the role individuals can play in safeguarding national security.

These government-community initiatives provide timely and accurate perspectives, reducing the community's vulnerability to extremist ideologies. The combined efforts underline the importance of a comprehensive approach to safeguard against radicalisation.

## **Conclusion**

Radicalisation remains a persistent concern, driven by various manifestations. While the current ceasefire between Israel and Hamas may reduce the violence, it does not address the underlying grievances that fuel radicalisation. Similarly, far-right extremism, often rooted in racial supremacy and conspiracy theories, continues to pose a serious security threat. Despite their ideological differences, both forms of radicalisation thrive on narratives of victimhood, perceived injustice, and the justification of violence.

Addressing this challenge requires a holistic and sustained approach. Extremist groups, both Islamist and far-right, exploit social divisions and global events to recruit and radicalise individuals. Preventing radicalisation demands early intervention, digital vigilance, and strengthened community engagement. There is a need for governments, educators, and civil society to work together to counter extremist propaganda and promote narratives of inclusion and resilience.

The spread of radical ideologies – whether through online platforms, social networks, or global events – underscores the need for continuous vigilance. In an increasingly interconnected world, security agencies need to rely on public education, critical thinking and cross-community dialogue to prevent individuals from being drawn into extremism. By fostering social cohesion and strengthening collective resilience, societies can mitigate the risks of radicalisation and safeguard long-term security.

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