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Counter-Ideological Work: The Need for Intellectual Rigour

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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. This effort has been under way for some time in the form of detainees' rehabilitation. The focus is now shifting from rehabilitating wayward individuals toward preventing the ideas from taking root.

The importance of intellectual rigour

Addressing the general public may not require the same level of intellectual rigour when addressing other segments of the community. For example, simply brushing off the actions of extremists as un-Islamic and non-reflective 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 hardcore sympathisers, supporters of extremism and their violent offshoots such as Al-Qaeda, 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. This further raises the status of the leadership of extremist groups in the eyes of their own supporters, who are able to justify their support by pointing to how weak the counter arguments are. 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, who published a 200-plus page document rebutting 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. In this Google age, one cannot afford to be this dismissive when the available information is abundant. 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. The fact that the wider public is actively looking for this information means that there is a deep hunger for knowledge. 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. In this regard, it is clear the extremists are in the lead in this battle.

Ensuring rigorousness

So how is rigorousness 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. 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.

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, truth matters. The scholar 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 there should be a strong theological foundation on which arguments stand. In the Islamic heritage of knowledge, this foundation is based on principles found in the Qur'an, the Prophetic Traditions and valid independent reasoning known as *ijtihad*.

Fourthly, counter-ideological work 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.

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