Countering Terrorist Ideology: The Ideological Response Unit

The article is an introduction to the work and strategic focus of the Ideological Response Unit, a component project of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR).

Many scholars and analysts have said that terrorism cannot be defeated by military or law and order means only. Counterterrorism operations require a multi-pronged and multi-faceted approach, which includes strategies to eliminate the roots and causes of terrorism.

One of the root causes of terrorism is the ideology that drives and motivates terrorists. This ideology can be ethno-nationalistic or politico-religious in nature or others.

The radical worldview of Al-Qaeda and its Southeast Asian counterpart, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), poses a particular challenge. The organization's pervasiveness and its deadly violence – as demonstrated by 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings; the August 5, 2003 Marriott bombing; and more recently, the July 17, 2009 Ritz-Carlton and Marriot Hotel bombings – have catapulted JI as the principal security threat to the region. If left unimpeded, JI’s ideology, propaganda, and political apparatus will further radicalize Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. They will indoctrinate them into a culture of violence and habituate them with radical interpretations of Islam. In time, new acts of violence will be carried out by a new generation of terrorist recruits.
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It is in this spirit that the Ideological Response Unit was launched by the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

Objectives and Strategic Focus

The principal objective of the Ideological Response Unit is to provide an intellectual counterweight to the radical message being espoused by terrorist groups. This can be achieved by developing a concerted effort to identify, expose, and counter the ideological threat posed by such groups.

The Ideological Response Unit is focused on information gathering, analysis work, responding to extremist ideology, policy recommendation and networking with relevant parties. The unit aspires to become the main academic repository for primary source materials and readings on radical Islam in Southeast Asia. As such, its scope of work covers academic research, field work, public education, training, collation of materials, and policy study. The unit has already mapped out a good picture of extremist ideology and this has helped offer a more accurate and precise counter-ideology. (Please refer to the sidebar for a list of the Unit's most recent accomplishments)

Target Audience

It is important to note that the primary target group of the Ideological Response Unit is not the terrorists but the majority of Muslims. The aim is to provide them with a correct understanding of the religion that is relevant to the contemporary context and current priorities, so that they will not be easily influenced by the terrorists' propaganda. The majority Muslims should be "immunized" against the viral threat of extremist ideologies that are freely disseminated through the Internet.

It might be impossible to persuade any fanatic hardcore members of Muslim terrorist groups to give up their ideology. However, in the battle for the hearts and minds, the majority of Muslims, can be convinced to desist Al-Qaeda's ideology and to defuse any motivation to support it. Terrorist groups can only persist through popular support. Conversely, such support also "plays a fundamental role in the group’s decline."

Another important target group, which is usually overlooked in counter-ideological work, are the...
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non-Muslims. The aim is to provide them with alternative perspectives to terrorist ideas that hopefully will reduce their anxiety, concern and misunderstanding of Islam and Muslims. In a multi-racial and multi-religious country, this is an important aspect of social harmony, which counter-terrorism strategy needs to preserve and protect. Often, terrorism also aims to destabilize a society or a country. It may be a direct or indirect objective because instability will make counter-terrorism operation more complicated and difficult.

Sample of work done by the ICPVTR Ideological Response Unit: From top left clockwise-pamphlets on “Don’t be Extreme in Your Religion” and “Questions and Answers on Jihad”, article published in the Straits Times, and RSIS Commentary.
How Jihadists Frame Their Justification for Terror

The following article is a brief and simplified explanation of extremist justification of terror and how it is constructed. It must be noted though that what is illustrated below is a simplified version for quick and easy understanding. An in-depth study of its detailed intricacies must be taken for an effective counter-argument. A simple way of understanding extremist ideology should not lead to simplistic views or response. Any battle would be easily lost if one underestimates his foe.

The use of religion as a justification for terrorist attacks by the so-called Jihadist usually consists seven interlocking layered arguments, representing the roots of their world view. The first layer of the argument is about defining life and the other. Life is essentially a battle between Islam and kufr (disbelief). Kufr is regarded as the product of Satan that is not only anathema to, but will destroy Islam. It is the greatest sin that must be eradicated. The other is all that profess and support kufr. Islam as the supreme religion means Muslims are obligated to reign over kufr and kuffar (infidels).

The second layer of the argument is about labeling the other as enemy. Since Satan is man’s enemy to the end of days, the kufr and kuffar is the product of the devil, then it must be despised as enemy too. Like Satan, the kuffar will never be pleased with Muslims until they follow the path of kufr. All kuffar are in conspiracy against Islam.

The third layer of the argument is about reinforcing the label by providing “empirical credibility” to it. To achieve this, historical events are often used to prove that all kuffar are inherently hostile towards Islam and Muslims. Some of the most cited historical events are:

- The persecution by Meccan pagans on early Muslims.
- Armed battles between the Prophet and the Arab pagans.
- The betrayal and treachery of the Jews in Medina.
- The Christian Roman Empire’s support of hostile Arab Christian tribes towards the Prophet.
- The hostility of the Zoroastrian Persian Empire.
- The crusades.
- Western colonialism of Muslim lands.

These are further reinforced with contemporary events such as the following:

- Persecution of Muslims by Hindu India
- Persecution of Muslims by communists under the former Soviet Union.
- Injustices and persecutionbefell upon Muslims in Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania and Chechnya.
- Current war in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Pillage and plunder of natural resources in Muslim lands.
- The spread of moral decadence to Muslim society through Westernization program.

The fourth layer of the argument is the beginning of justification for armed jihad against all kuffar. Based on the above contemporary events, it is framed that today, the kuffar have not only caused sufferings to Muslims and the spread of immorality, but also literally occupied Muslim lands that must be reclaimed. The occupation of Muslim lands has caused death to thousands of innocent Muslims. Thus, the fight against the kuffar is not only at the ideological level through preaching but also armed resistance. Armed jihad
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becomes obligatory as self-defense to liberate occupied Muslim lands or reclaim back all historical Muslim lands.

The fifth layer of the argument is about mobilizing all Muslims. Armed jihad becomes not only obligatory for society but fard ayn (personal obligatory) upon every single Muslim and it is the only way to protect Islam from the kuffar’s conspiracy to annihilate it.

The sixth layer of the argument is about breaking down all traditional restrictions of armed jihad. By ruling armed jihad today as fard ayn, all restrictions traditionally imposed by Muslim scholars on armed jihad i.e. the need for permission of parents, husband, creditors, right authority, the use of children for combat, suicide bombing, targeting civilians, committing robbery and other illegal activities to finance jihad, are removed. The argument goes that armed jihad is the only way to bring back glory to Islam and Muslim and it is the greatest benefit of all, any restrictions that can hamper the effectiveness of jihad can be compromised or anything can contribute to victory can be permitted under the pretext of “lesser evil” for “greater good”. Armed jihad, thus, becomes an all-out-permissive-war obligated upon all Muslims that can target all; non-Muslims and non-jihadi Muslims (for either being apostates, or great hindrance to greater good or simply inevitable collateral damage).

The seventh layer of the argument is about justifying terrorism. Killing the civilian infidels is justified because Muslim civilian have been targeted. Furthermore, the kuffar civilians cannot be regarded as true civilians because they contribute to the hostility against Muslim by “paying taxes, voting in government or serving as military reserves.”

In 2007, the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) in Singapore launched a website aimed at countering extremist ideology used to recruit militants and justify terrorist attacks. The website could be accessed at www.rrg.sg

Taken together this ideology creates a powerful narrative. The challenge is to create an equally compelling counter narrative, while at the same time patiently challenging each and every layer of the argument with trained professionals who thoroughly know the tenets of Islam and are able to bring those who have fallen for the ideology back to a more mainstream understanding of their faith.
The International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) was the first centre to be established at the Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, Singapore.

The Centre's objective is to develop a complete and comprehensive understanding of threats from politically motivated violence and terrorism, as well as to develop appropriate counter-measures against the same. To fulfill its objectives, ICPVTR seeks to integrate academic theory with practical knowledge. It thereby conducts cutting-edge, action-oriented research on mitigating conflict and political violence.

The Centre is staffed by academic specialists, religious scholars, as well as personnel from the law enforcement, military and intelligence agencies, among others. The Centre is culturally and linguistically diverse, comprising of functional and regional analysts from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe and North America.

Events and Publications

25-30 November 2009 “Workshop on Terrorist Rehabilitation Implementation” at the Singapore National Library. Please contact Miss Tuty Rahainah Bte. Mostarom at isrmtuty@ntu.edu.sg or visit www.pvtr.org for more details.

- Targeting Terrorist Financing: International Cooperation and New Regimes (Routledge 2009) by Dr. Arabinda Acharya

- International Aviation and Terrorism: Evolving Threats, Evolving Security (Routledge 2009) by Dr. John Harrison