Chapter 9

Psychological Effects of the Threat of ISIS:
A Preliminary Inquiry of Singapore Case Studies

Weiying Hu
Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore

ABSTRACT

The threat of violent extremism has been considerably influenced by the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), its inhumane brutal killings in Iraq and Syria, and exploitation of social media to recruit large numbers of foreign fighters in a scale never seen before. This development has serious implications for Singapore’s security landscape. This aggressive promotion of fighting in Syria has resonated with a handful of Singaporeans, who were radicalised by radical online propaganda. In this psychological study of the Singapore cases, there are five psychological drivers that have contributed to the radicalisation process of these cases. They are: (1) justifying violence, (2) romanticising the notion of a utopian state, (3) desire to be a ‘good’ Muslim, (4) escaping the ‘unbearable present’ world, and (5) existential anxiety in relation to End Times prophecies. The preliminary findings further indicate that most of these radicalised individuals have engaged in negative activism.

INTRODUCTION

Extremist ideological narratives that are pervasive on the Internet have proven capable of gaining a foothold in the psyche of individuals who seek some form of justifications for their frustrations and anger over the plight of Muslims suffering in conflict zones. Some Singaporeans have not been immune to such narratives, nor resist the lure of the violent ideology perpetuated by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Two Singapore citizens are known to have gone to Syria with their families to partake in the conflict there (Saad, 2014). At the time of writing, a few other Singaporeans had intended to fight in Syria (among other foreign conflict zones) but were stopped in time from doing so. Thus far, a handful had been detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) to prevent them from fighting in Syria (Lim, 2015).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0156-5.ch009
Apart from these cases, several other Singaporeans were detected to have been radicalised by radical online propaganda. They did not have any formal religious education and relied primarily on the Internet for religious knowledge. These individuals were at different stages of radicalisation. Some had considered travelling to Syria or Iraq for jihad. Others were supportive of the armed jihad and showed their support through pro-jihadi online postings, or purchased jihadi-themed paraphernalia like ISIS flags, or apparel and stickers with captions and graphics that carried connotations of militant jihad.

A commonly asked question is whether there is a particular profile to these home-grown radicalised individuals that can help identify a person who is likely to gravitate towards violent extremism. A team of psychologists has worked with these radicalised individuals (i.e., those who have been dealt with under the ISA as well as those who were in the various stages of radicalisation) as part of Singapore’s holistic approach towards the rehabilitation of these individuals. From the psychological research, no fixed profile could be distilled. The psychologists however did identify several common psychological factors that have underpinned those individuals’ sympathy for the ISIS cause.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HOME-GROWN RADICALISED INDIVIDUALS

Ability to Justify the Use of Violence

The key feature in the radicalisation of these individuals appears to be their ability to rationalise and justify the use of violence. There are three ways in which such justifications have been made (Sabuced, Blaco, & De la Corte, 2003): (1) through attributing responsibility to the opponent, (2) by delegitimising the opponent, and (3) through the asymmetrical evaluation of suffering.

Displacing Responsibility to the Enemy

The majority of the radicalised individuals studied were found to have developed a binary worldview that enabled them to separate the ‘good guys’ from those they believed to be responsible for the Syrian crisis. When faced with a violent situation, they had a tendency to engage in external attribution of responsibilities (Hewstone, Jaspars, & Lallje, 1982; Taylor, & Jaggi, 1974), blaming the opponents for initiating violence (Sabuced et al., 2003). This is similar to the rhetoric used by supporters of ISIS, where the responsibility for ISIS violent and extreme actions is displaced onto its enemies. The argument used is that the ‘morally reprehensible’ actions of the Bashar Assad regime justified and legitimised ISIS violent retaliation, and that the violence employed was mainly in defence of the vulnerable and helpless individuals who were oppressed by the regime.

Many radicalised individuals view the West as the enemy, for being the source of evils that have corrupted and tyrannised Muslims. Given the asymmetrical nature of the balance of power between the armed forces of the West and that of ISIS, the latter’s use of violent means is therefore perceived as legitimate, as it is wielded with the purpose of redressing the alleged injustices done to Muslims.

This perspective was articulated by a Singaporean subject who said that ISIS was the “good guys” protecting Iraq from the American invaders, and ISIS actions were “right” because they were protecting the land of the Muslims. He also regarded the ISIS fighters as freedom fighters.

www.igi-global.com/e-resources/library-recommendation/?id=115

Related Content

The Impacts of Financial Variables on Employment Planning in Turkish Banking Sector

www.igi-global.com/article/the-impacts-of-financial-variables-on-employment-planning-in-turkish-banking-sector/188418?camid=4v1a

Crowdsourcing for Human Rights Monitoring: Challenges and Opportunities for Information Collection and Verification

www.igi-global.com/chapter/crowdsourcing-for-human-rights-monitoring/117041?camid=4v1a

Risk-Based Selection of Portfolio: Heuristic Approach

www.igi-global.com/chapter/risk-based-selection-of-portfolio/125761?camid=4v1a

Effects of Corporate Social Responsibility and Creating Shared Value on Sustainability

www.igi-global.com/article/effects-of-corporate-social-responsibility-and-creating-shared-value-on-sustainability/203607?camid=4v1a